

# **Nurses and constructions of motherhood: 'scientific motherhood' and the rise of child welfare services in Tasmania 1918 - 1930**

**submitted by**

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requirements for the degree of Master of Nursing.

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## Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person where due reference is not made in the text.

Sheryl Brennan

## Abstract

Motherhood is a momentous life-change for women. While commonalities of experience exist between women, each woman's experience is unique. Social constructions define motherhood in particular ways and in doing so tend to deny the range and complexity of individual experience. In recent decades a wide body of feminist and other literature has developed which analyses the way motherhood has been historically constructed and what this means for women. This thesis concentrates upon the ways in which early twentieth century Australians, in common with their counterparts in North America, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, constructed 'scientific motherhood'.

The perspective and method of history are used in this work to explore the construction of scientific motherhood. In particular, the establishment of the Tasmanian Child Welfare Service is examined, for the origins of this service are closely linked to the requirement that information be disseminated throughout the population about modern 'scientific' mothering. Therefore, this thesis looks at the historical development of this service, at how it grew out of a late 19th century veneration of science as well as concerns regarding population and the position of women in society. It shows the influences lying behind the construction of motherhood as a science and outlines the part played by child health services in bringing this new, as it was perceived at the time, view of rational and efficient mothering to women.

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# Table of contents

Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of tables	vi
Notes on Nomenclature	vii
Chapter 1: Motherhood constructions: A personal story	1
Chapter 2: The emergence of scientific motherhood	13
Late 19 <sup>th</sup> century motherhood	15
The falling birth rate	19
The high infant mortality rate	21
The scientific response	25
The infant welfare movement	29
Chapter 3: The beginnings of child welfare services in Tasmania	33
Chapter 4: Training mothers and babies	43
Training mother and baby	45
Spreading the message- the use of propaganda	51
Saving the babies 1918 - 1930	58
Chapter 5: A return to the beginning - nurses and constructions of motherhood	65
Appendix: Thoughts on historical research	71
Reference List	73